

# A New Locality For Desert Fan Palms in California

James W. Cornett

Palm Springs Desert Museum  
Palm Springs, California

Native groves of desert fan palms (*Washingtonia filifera*) are isolated and widely scattered throughout the Sonoran Desert of southeastern California, Baja California Norte, and western Arizona. The location of most of these are known (Brown et al., 1976; Henderson, 1951, 1971; California Department of Fish and Game, 1984).

The author visited Clapp Spring on 19 June, 1985 and found 44 palms distributed among the following size categories: 22 seedlings; 20 with trunk height less than 1 m; 3 with trunk 1-2 m; 2 with trunk 2-4 m; 2 mature palms 4 m in height (Figure 1). The author was unable to locate any literature reference to palms being present at Clapp Spring which is located 12 km west of the Colorado River at Latitude 33 24'36" N, Longitude 114 51'25" W, Riverside County, California. The closest natural palm oases are at Corn Spring, 48 km to the northwest, and in the Kofa Mountains of western Arizona, 62 km to the east (Figure 2).

Oasis plants, listed in order of decreasing ground cover, included *Washingtonia filifera*, *Prosopis glandulosa*, *Sesuvium verrucosum*, *Suaeda torreyana*, *Cynodon dactylon*, *Tamarix ramosissima*, and *Schismus barbatus*. The only surface water present is a 1 m wide puddle that is kept clear of vegetation by trampling of burros and mule deer which come frequently to drink. Several well-used trails lead to the spring from the surrounding desert.

Apparently the palms are of recent origin. Walter D. Scott (pers. comm.) stated that no palms were present when he first visited the spring in 1930. At that time *Tamarix* was the dominant plant and a small corral had been built near the waterhole by Jack Moore, Harley Well, and Charlie Head. In the early 1930's Scott built a second corral to temporarily hold wild horses that he captured from the surrounding desert. This corral is still evident. Scott indicated that the palms appeared in the 1940's and feels confident that they were not introduced by humans. John Smith (pers. comm.) states that many ornamental palms had been planted in the vicinity of Blythe in the 1920s. Some of these trees are over 19 m tall today and are within 25 km of Clapp Spring. This would be the nearest seed source. Based on papers by Bullock (1980) and Cornett (1984), it is possible that seeds were introduced by coyotes.

For their apparent age of about 40 years, the two mature palms are unusually short, reaching only about 6 m in height. The author has recorded trunk growth rates of up to 0.7 m per year among young palms at Thousand Palms Oasis, Riverside County, California. In stature, the Clapp Spring palms resemble the short, stocky trees at Mopah Spring in the Turtle Mountains and Pygmy Grove in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, California. In all three instances surface moisture is sparse, suggesting the palms are receiving a minimal amount of water. Otherwise the palms at Clapp Spring appear healthy and the two mature palms were beginning to flower on 19 June.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Charles and Kathleen Copeland of Blythe, California, for bringing this palm oasis to his attention. This report was made possible through a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation.



Figure 1. Clapp Spring, Riverside County, California. The two mature palms are at the right. The waterhole and immature palms are at the left.

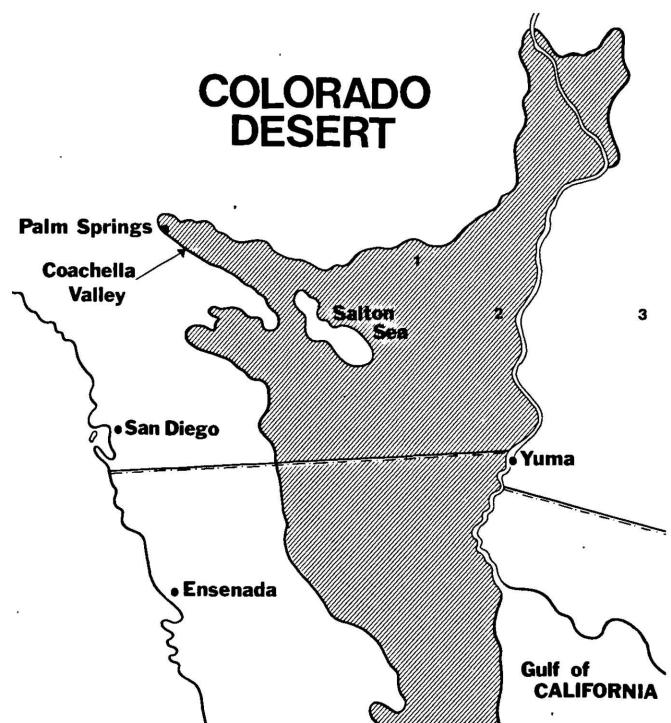


Figure 2. Location of Clapp Spring (2) in relation to Corn Spring (1) and Kofa Palm Canyon (3). The Colorado Desert is indicated by cross-hatching.

## Literature Cited

- Brown, D. E., N. B. Carmony, C. H. Lowe, and R. M. Turner, 1976. A second locality for native California fan palms (*Washingtonia filifera*) in Arizona. *J. Ariz. Acad. Sci.* 11: 37-41.
- Bullock, S. H. 1980. Dispersal of a desert palm by opportunistic frugivores. *Principes* 24(1): 29-32.
- California Department of Fish and Game. 1984. *California Natural Diversity Data Base. Report Number Two.* Calif. Dept. Fish and Game. Sacramento.
- Cornett, J. W. 1984. The desert palm oasis. *Education Bulletin* 84-1. Education Foundation, Desert Protective Council. Spring Valley, California.
- Henderson, R. 1951. Wild palms of the California Desert. *Desert Magazine.* Palm Desert, California.
- Henderson, R. 1971. *Palm Canyons of Baja California.* La Siesta Press. Glendale, California.